

## PROBING THE THEORY OF SUBJECTIVE DEVELOPMENT IN MULLĀ ṢADRĀ'S EPISTEMOLOGY

*Abbas Kharabi Masouleh  
Mohd Zufri bin Mamat  
Maisarah binti Hasbullah*

### **Abstract**

*Mullā Ṣadrā's approach to the reality of knowledge to a large extent slopes down to a kind of subjectivism. He viewed the process of obtaining knowledge as an extension of the human soul from existential potential to actuality and from existential deficiency to perfection. Considering his understanding of realism, a question of consonance with his subjectivist inclination requires inquiry. The author applies an interdisciplinary approach in a close examination of Ṣadrā's epistemology that reveals a kind of subjectivism contained in his epistemic exposition, especially in his emphasis on the existential perfection of the human soul. The effort helps us reconsider the foundations of his pioneering work on transcendent theosophy.*

**Keywords:** Mullā Ṣadrā, Human soul, Epistemology, Knowledge, Subjectivism

## Introduction

Inquiries into the reality of knowledge and the relationship between the human mind and the external world have been made from ancient times and each attempt seems to draw lines of separation between numerous philosophical doctrines. Muslim scholars such as Mullā Ṣadrā also dealt with the issue in terms of their own metaphysical doctrines while the epistemic gap between the inner and the external worlds was not an insurmountable problem for them. Under the influence of Shiite authorities and mystical philosophers on one hand and archetypal Muslims theological leanings on the other, Mullā Ṣadrā dealt with the issue according to his own Transcendent Theology. His Transcendent Theology posits that knowledge is not a process of replication or copy in the external world by discrete realities called ‘known’ and ‘knower’, but is rather a subjective development of ontological concrescence that occurs within the existence of the *knower*-subject.

Muslim scholars influenced by Platonic Ideas and Aristotelian abstractions or interpretations offered by commentators like Plotinus have taken different approaches. Al Fārābī (872–951) and Avicenna (980–1037) were pioneers of Peripatetic Philosophy; Sheykh Shahāb al-Din Suhrawardi was an illuminative thinker; and Mullā Ṣadrā (1571/2-1640) founded Transcendent Theosophy. All were deeply inspired by Greek predecessors on matters of knowledge<sup>1</sup> and the human mind. Sharing much in common with the realism of Al-Fārābī and Avicenna regarding the external world as undeniable fact and counterpart of the human mind, Ṣadrā held a completely subject-based concept that differed from Peripatetic Philosophy in its ontological foundations and consequent epistemological theories. The present research traces Ṣadrā's theory of subjective development and epistemic exposition by explaining relevant elements vis-à-vis his philosophical system.

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<sup>1</sup> For further details of the matter of knowledge among Muslim thinkers, see Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam: A Study in Islamic Philosophies of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)-International Islamic University Malaysia, 2006).

Ṣadrā's initial epistemological step to obtaining knowledge was to acknowledge existence, beginning with the 'self' that is known intuitively by each person. But Ṣadrā did not attempt to offer a picture of existence through self-reflection, which would be confined to the internal process of the cogito.<sup>2</sup> As for the role of existence in Ṣadrā's doctrine, Oliver Leaman regards his interpretation of existence as proceeding from the self to a larger notion that includes all of reality.<sup>3</sup> Seyyed H. Nasr indicated the role of 'existence' in Ṣadrā's philosophical system, in spite of its indefinability, was that of constant dynamism.<sup>4</sup> Hence, this 'dynamic indefinable connotation of existence' provides a backbone for Ṣadrā's philosophical system. As such, the principle of existence vs. quiddity is the basis for Ṣadrā's Transcendental Theosophy (*al-Ḥikmah al-Muta'āliyyah*). Fazlur Rahman wrote *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* in which he examined different philosophical dimensions of existence in Ṣadrā's worldview.<sup>5</sup> Henry Corbin translated Ṣadrā's treatise, *al-Mashā'ir*, into French and presented a detailed expository exegesis regarding the position of existence in Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The circumstance in which Descartes attempted to discover a trustful object was doubt that questioned the principles in which the knowledge of his time was based. Therefore, the theory of doubt as a touchstone has an effective role in this philosopher's methodology, and he just admits the propositions which could survive in the flood of doubts. In his meditation, Descartes discovered an undeniable reality, thinking thing, and asserted that he is something which thinks and that he could not deny or even doubt this reality. See J. Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, eds., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Adam and Tannery, eds., *Ceuvres de Descartes*, 12 vols. (Eden Paris: Vrin/CMRS, 1964-1976). Therefore, the thinking thing, or self, is the first undeniable object that he found and self-awareness was the first knowledge he acknowledged as a secured point to establish all his knowledge on it.

<sup>3</sup> O. Leaman, "Mullā Ṣadrā, Perception and Knowledge by Presence." *Transcendent Philosophy* 1, 1 (40) (2000).

<sup>4</sup> S. H. Nasr, "Existence (*Wujūd*) and Quiddity (*Māhiyyah*) in Islamic Philosophy." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 29 (4) (1989), 409-428.

<sup>5</sup> F. Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> H. Corbin, *Kitāb al-Mashā'ir, Sadra own Summa of his philosophy* (Le Livre des Penetrations Metaphysiques) (Tehran-Paris, 1956).

Mullā Ṣadrā's doctrine and Islamic philosophy evolved as an ontological transformation from Avicenna's essentialism to a kind of existentialism.<sup>7</sup> The changeover is perfectly echoed in Ṣadrā's epistemology and definition of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Avicennian essentialism dominated philosophical inclinations at the time of Ṣadrā's challenge. The unorthodoxy therefore branded Ṣadrā's approach to the reality of knowledge and his entire epistemological system.

Mullā Ṣadrā settled on a definition of knowledge that firmly planted philosophical mysticism within explications of the reality of knowledge as an existential drive to perfect the human soul. Avicenna's peripatetic philosophy claimed that existence constituted reality simply because it opposed non-existence as the accident of quiddity.<sup>9</sup> However, according to Ṣadrā, the essence or quiddity of an existent is naught but limitations of its existence as apprehended by human intellect. Unlike Aristotelian essentialism, Ṣadrā claimed that an entity's essence holds a negative description that determines the confines of its existence, such as human *being* for example. Based on this ever-expanding notion of existence, Ṣadrā's subjectivism permeates his epistemology. This is to say there is nothing but existence and the extent of our existence as human's perfection determines the range of our knowledge. Hence, the definition of knowledge changes from presenting the form of a

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<sup>7</sup> Avicenna's essentialism was inspired by Aristotelian Metaphysics, according to which everything that exists has a definite essence that is immanent and constitutes its nature. For Aristotle, everything is a special thing and is distinguished from the 'other' in terms of unique essence; hence, everything is what it is due to its essence. However, in Ṣadrā's ontology, a *knower*-subject subjectively abstracts the essence of every contingent thing as derived by the limitations of the existence of the *thing*. Indeed, for Mullā Ṣadrā the essence of everything tends toward subjective reality. He put forward this explanation vis-à-vis his ontological theory on the primacy of existence, which holds that the reality of everything *is* its existence. Therefore, as opposed to essentialism, the ontological existentialism of Ṣadrā's ontology structures his metaphysics. But Ṣadrā's existentialism should not be confused with the Existentialism prevalent in Western philosophies, which originates with Humanism.

<sup>8</sup> For details see M Zaimaran, "A Comparative Study and Critique of Philosophical and Educational Essentialism" (Phd dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Ibn Sinā, *al-Shifā' (Ilāhiyyāt)* (Metaphysics), eds., G. Qanawāti, S. Dunya and S. Zayid (I. Madkur, revised and introduced) (Cairo, 1950).

known-object to a *knower*-subject to 'presenting the *known*-object itself to the *knower*', or more precisely, 'the unity of *known* and *knower*', which Ṣadrā interpreted as a mode of existence<sup>10</sup> Thus, obtaining knowledge is a progressive process within the existence of the human soul, and develops more and more until it reaches a degree whereby the existence of that person equals the existence of the entire universe.

This connotation of knowledge enables us to understand Sadra's singular subjectivism as an epistemic exposition, especially his emphasis on the existential perfection of the human soul. The present research therefore takes an interdisciplinary approach in an attempt to trace subjectivistic attitudes in Ṣadrā's epistemology, especially when explaining elements relevant to his philosophy of psychology and his metaphysical foundations.

### **Mullā Ṣadrā's Conception of Knowledge**

In a number of statements Ṣadrā indicated that the mystery of knowledge is the most difficult of philosophical problems. The trouble begins with how the human soul apprehends the intelligible reality of something. He was of the opinion that man's ability to attain intelligible forms is the crucial issue and that its more obscure aspects are not readily noticed by Muslim scholars.<sup>11</sup>

In his system, Ṣadrā's explanation of the reality of knowledge ('ilm) strongly parallels an explication of *being* (wujūd). As for the reality of *being*, Sabzawāri, a Ṣadrā commentator states, "The notion of being is one of the best-known things, but its deepest reality lies in the extremity of hiddenness."<sup>12</sup> That is, we face logical difficulty

<sup>10</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Hikma al-Muta'aliyya fi-l-asfār al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a*, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Ehyā al-Turāth al-Arabī press, 1981).; For details see Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-mabda' wal ma'ad*, 2. (Tehran: Bunyād e-Hikmat Islami Ṣadrā, 2002); Mullā Ṣadrā, *Al-Mashā'ir*, ed. H. Corbin (Tehran: Ṭahūrī. 1984), 50; Mullā Ṣadrā, *Mafātiḥ al-Ghaib* (Tehran: Mu'assisa e-Muṭāliātva Taḥqīqāt Farhangī, 1984), 262.

<sup>11</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā (1378 A.H.). *al-Hikma al-Muta'aliyya fi-l-asfār al-'Aqliyya al-Arba'a*, ed. M. R. al-Muzaffar (Tehran, 1378 A.H.), I 3:312; A. Kalin, "Mullā Ṣadrā's Theory of Knowledge and the Unification of the Intellect and the Intelligible (Ittihad al-'Aqilwa'l-ma'qul)." (Phd dissertation, The George Washington University, 2003); Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfāri*, 3:150, 151, 278.

<sup>12</sup> H. M. H. Sabzavari, *Sharḥ al-Manzoume (Hikmat)* (Tehran: Entesharat

when defining *being*. Components of a logical definition are genus (*jins*) and specific differentia (*faṣl*). However, ‘being’ as a simple reality has neither, so we cannot present its logical definition. We face a similar difficulty when attempting a logical definition of knowledge. This is because *genus* and *specific differentia* include elements of a *thing* held in common with other *things*, and specific elements that exclude *others*. Knowledge, like *being*, is a simple (*basīṭ*) reality for which no constituent elements can be presumed. Moreover, to define a reality we must appeal to something that is somehow more evident and clearer than the *thing* we are attempting to define. But we intuitively know there is nothing more evident than *being* because there is nothing outside of existence; hence, *being* is the ground of all *things*. According to Ṣadrā, the only way to access the reality of *being* is existential intuition, which is a special kind of knowledge he calls *illuminative presence* (*al-huḍūr al-ishrāqi*).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, knowledge cannot be defined because everything is defined by knowledge. And since there is nothing more clearly evident than knowledge, we likewise define knowledge by itself that logically is called circular definition. Hence, *being* and *knowledge* share a parallel that defies every logical definition. For this reason, Mullā Ṣadrā explained knowledge as a mode of *being* (*naḥw al-wujūd*).

Considering knowledge a mystery while attributing it to man as one of his abilities led Ṣadrā to a peculiar subjectivistic attitude in his approach to the reality of knowledge. All of his assertions imply that the reality of knowledge is an existential aspect of man’s *existence* in addition to being rooted in the ontological dimension of the human soul. In this sense, existence or *being* (*wujūd*) is *the* basis for all knowledge and highlights the existential position of the human soul which is the *knower*-subject. Therefore, as we shall see, Ṣadrā’s explanation of knowledge holds an intimate interrelationship with the reality of the human soul (*psyche*) to which we now turn.

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‘IlmiyeIslamiye, 1977), 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> Kalin, “Mullā Ṣadrā’s theory..., 140.

## The Reality of Psyche or Soul in Mullā Ṣadrā's Definition of Knowledge

Ṣadrā's philosophical system steeps *knowledge* in his interpretation of the notion of psyche or soul (*nafs*) as the *knower*-subject. He explains the reality of the soul by its management of and ontological relationship to the body. Body management is rooted in the soul's ontological position as a kind of existential perfection of the human body. Among Muslim thinkers, Ṣadrā was first to propound an ontological relationship between body and soul, explaining the body as the soul's beginning followed by an ongoing spiritual subsistence of the soul. Determining the soul's reality enabled Ṣadrā to ascertain an ontological position for the soul relative to *imaginal* and *intelligible* realms. Such clarification opened the door to his concept of knowledge as a mode of *being* for the human soul as *knower*.

For Ṣadrā, therefore, the psyche is not an independent substance that can be separated from the body. Its relationship to the living body can be compared to abilities and functions of different bodily organs. Simply put, the psyche is like the power of sight for the eyes or hearing for ears, or walking for feet.<sup>14</sup> Aristotle put forth this interpretation of the psyche as the first *entelechia* of a living being whose major and unique functions were motion and perception.<sup>15</sup> Pursuing the Aristotelian position, Ṣadrā considered the psyche the dynamism of a living entity that enabled appropriate functional performance.

However, souls function differently in various living entities. For instance, in plants as living entities, the main task of the psyche is taking in nutrition, growth and seed production. In animals, the soul senses and moves the body in response to appetites. In the human being, the psyche has the additional capacity of intellection (*ta'addul*) and thus obtains knowledge by creating intelligible forms. Ṣadrā used this special capacity to bridge the epistemic gap between the human mind and the external world.

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*. Books II and III, ed. D.W. Hamlyn (CH. Shields Revised). (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 11:1.412a. 27–28.

<sup>15</sup> D. J. Allan, *The Philosophy of Aristotle*. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

In bridging this gap, Ṣadrā had to clear a controversial hurdle by closing the gap between the human soul and body. For this he attempted to demonstrate that the psyche is not a distinct *thing* independent of the body, but rather a component of the living body that comprised a special dynamism that appropriately managed both body and intellection as distinctly significant tasks. Hence, Ṣadrā waxed toward Aristotle's concept of the psyche as entelechy, which explains the reality of the soul as a consequence of existential perfection proceeding from its bodily origin to its spiritual subsistence. Relying on this explanation as the reality of human soul, Ṣadrā dissolved all boundaries between its materiality and spirituality. With this as the principle: the human soul was material in genesis but spiritual in survival.<sup>16</sup>

The principle of continuous existential perfection of human *being* allowed Ṣadrā to explain the reality of knowledge as a mode of human *being* that involved evolutionary characteristics. As an Islamic philosopher, Ṣadrā made the first attempt to bridge the ontological gap between soul and body as a single continuous reality. Prior to this, Avicenna and other Peripatetic philosophers traditionally accounted them as essentially distinct substances. Ṣadrā's interpretation and philosophical undertaking had specific consequences that opened new horizons in eschatology, psychology, and epistemology. Its crucial epistemic consequence pursued in this research is the explanation of knowledge as the very continuation of existential perfection of the human soul, the existential perfection which has begun from bodily origination to the spiritual stage of human soul. Based on this principle of existential progress, Ṣadrā deemed the reality of knowledge as a kind of human virtue that involved the extension of human existence that bridged the epistemic gap between the soul as *knower* and the external world as the *known*.

In light of the principle of ontological perfection, Ṣadrā took an important step toward bridging the epistemic gap between human soul and the external world as an existential virtue. He thus contended that intellection was a processive mode of being in which exists a kind of unity or identity between the act of intellection and

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<sup>16</sup> Kalin, "Mullā Ṣadrā's theory...., 199; Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* I (3): 330–33.

its substratum, namely the *intellector* or *knower*-subject.<sup>17</sup> However, this unity should not be misunderstood as any mechanical joining of *knower* and *known*. By asserting that intellection is both a progressive and processive mode of *being*, Ṣadrā challenged the reality of knowledge as an essence. For him, the reality of knowledge was identical with *being* because he explicitly avers that knowledge is also a mode of *being*. Thus, unlike the Peripatetic assumption, the knowledge of some *thing* is not the presence of the form of that *thing* in the human mind. Hence, knowledge is not a process of replication or copying, that is, in the sense that it has a correspondent fact in the external world. Knowledge, from Ṣadrā's point of view, is rather a process of concrescence, meaning a 'growing together' that occurs within the existence of the *knower*-subject. Indeed, Mullā Ṣadrā proposed a constructionist approach to the matter of knowledge by offering an existential evolutionary characterization that fundamentally involves a kind of subjective development within the existence of the *knower*-subject, one that is not separate from the *knower* but is the reality of the *knower*-subject.

To understand Ṣadrā's concept of the reality of this existential development, one should consider the process of knowledge as a single continual progress in which previous frameworks are not discarded by new structures but rather develop (evolve) into a higher existential level. Thus, relying on an inclusive unitary notion of existence as the reality of knowledge allowed Ṣadrā to justify his explication of knowledge as a continuous process in which the *knower* consists and carries previous stages while, at the same time, he/she transcends them. The processivity allows the existential evolution of knowledge, which involves cognitive development where new knowledge unfolds upon old knowledge and extends those frameworks towards more meaningful and integrated forms. Because the process of knowledge in this philosophical system is based on existential progress, the process of obtaining new knowledge in accord with ontological foundations proceeds from the incipient to the more complex bearing broad-spectrum meanings.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār* 1:294.

<sup>18</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār*, I (3): 213; Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār*, I (4): 115.

Accordingly, Ṣadrā proposed an existential relationship between the human soul as the *knower*-subject and knowledge as the *known*-object. Thus, if a relation occurs in the external world, it necessitates the differentiation of two concrete sides in the extra-mental world. For instance, the relation between father and a son related to that father depends on two existents, namely father and son. It is impossible such a relationship can occur in one single existent. Hence, each objective entity has a separate and independent being and via mental analysis we comprehend their relationship. In some cases, a relation occurs between two sides in which one is ontologically dependent on the other. For instance, consider this proposition: “This table is brown” refers to two realities, table and brownness, of which one is substance and the other an accident. The relation between both is such that the *being* of one as accident belongs to the other as substance. In Ṣadrā’s system, the relationship between substance (*jawhar*) and accident (*‘arad*) forms an ontological dependence of the accident on the substance, such that both univocally share the concept of existence and equivocally enjoy its reality. Such a relationship is contingent on both things as separate realities that at times are independent and in other instances one depends on the other.

However, human self-consciousness holds no separation between realities as *knower*-subject and *known*-object. Knowledge we have of ourselves is not apart from ourselves. More precisely, our knowledge of ourselves is identical with ourselves. In self-consciousness, we do not apprehend separation or distinction between a *known*-object and ourselves as *knower*-subject, except as mental analysis and comparison. In *Asfār*, Ṣadrā explicitly emphasizes the unity in self-consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

In *Asfār*, Ṣadrā defines knowledge as a special mode of the *knower’s being* in which the mode of a thing’s *being* is incorporeal or separated from matter. His main criterion for the realization of knowledge is this incorporeal state of a thing’s *being*. Moreover, to the extent that the *being* of something is free from matter, the reality of knowledge becomes more actualized as that thing’s entity. The *being* of a *thing* can be either independent or dependent (*idāfa*) and

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<sup>19</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār*, 3: 290.

belonging to another *thing*. However, dependence or independence does not constitute the reality of knowledge. Nonetheless, the degree of disembodiment of the thing's *being* as principle factor does indeed actualize the reality of knowledge. In other words, the cognition of a cognitive being owes to its freedom from the darkness and obscurity of matter. Such a definition substantiates an internal subjective notion of knowledge, quite separate and apart from any relational concept that can be analyzed vis-à-vis mental analysis between two realities, *known* and *knower*.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Concept of Creation in Mullā Ṣadrā's Definition of Knowledge**

Mullā Ṣadrā justified his subjectification of knowledge by claiming it is a creative power held in common by God and the human soul. For Ṣadrā this means that obtaining knowledge is a gradual process of construction, which at each stage and to some degree, the human soul (*knower*-subject) creates (*adds to*) existence which then evolves and transcends previous structures but without discarding them. This notion of a 'creative process' is key to understanding the relationship between the *known*-object and *knower*-subject. Ṣadrā saw a similarity between *known* and *knower* as a preparatory demonstration, claiming that since the soul cannot receive objective material reality not of a similar nature to itself, it must therefore create or issue its *form* as an *existence* that belongs to itself. More accurately, material objects in the external world as objects of knowledge, because of their quality of being material, cannot be presented to the human soul for perception; hence, the psyche must create counterparts as mental forms, which on one hand correspond to external objects but on the other are similar in nature to itself. The mental forms are similar in nature to the human soul because of their state of being immaterial. In this processivity, sense perceptions are merely preliminary activities during which the soul obtains the occasion to create a mental form corresponding to a perceptible object in the external world.

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<sup>20</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār*, 3: 51–2.

Ṣadrā's understanding of God's existence and knowledge of Himself intimately influenced his epistemology and any attempt to comprehend his concept of knowledge will fall short without knowing this theological explanation. The 'Necessary Being' (God), refers to a reality whose *being* (*wujūd*) is identical to its essence. *Necessary Being*, indeed, is pure *Being*; hence, its essence is its *Being* and its *being* is its Essence. Such *Being* is so pure, over-expanding and unfolding that no *otherness* or *multiplicity* is supposed *within* or *beyond* 'It' because beside 'It' only non-existence ('*adam*') can be supposed. According to Ṣadrā, therefore, such a *Being* is present to Himself since He is the *Necessary Being* whose essence is also His *Being*. Moreover, His essence is presence without mediation since the notion of presence (*huḍūr*) is opposite that of absence (*ghaybah*), whereby Ṣadrā consequently elicited the concept of 'presential knowledge'. By explication, knowledge *in God* implies a subject who *knows* an object that is *known* by the very act of knowing. Furthermore, since there is no multiplicity in the *Necessary Being*, Ṣadrā attempted to prove that God is at once *Knower* ('*al-alim*'), as well as *Known* (*al-ma'lum*) and *Knowledge* (*al-Ilm*).

Ṣadrā relied on this theological principle to explain the reality of knowledge within man. According to a prophetic tradition (Hadith), Adam (man) was created in the image of God.<sup>21</sup> Ṣadrā believed the cosmos is a manifestation of God's knowledge of Himself. Thus, since God knows Himself, the cosmos is existentiated as a precipitant constitution of God's internal knowledge. Consequently, man, being like God, also knows *imaginal* and *intelligible* forms and his *knowing* existentiates them. Hence, just as God's contemplation of Himself existentiates the cosmos, the creation of mental forms by man stems from the soul's activity of *knowing*; i.e. human intellection creates its own mental forms by knowing them. Since mental forms are created and existentiated by human intellect, they present to man directly whereby man knows everything through them.

Unlike the human soul, God's contemplation is infinite and His knowledge of an object grants objective existence (*al-wujūd*)

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Arabi, *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiya* (1-4), ed. A. Afifi (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Arabiya al-Kubra, 1911).

*al-'ayni*) to that object. Man's contemplation of an object is limited to the creation of a mental form of that object within his mind. Man's ability is therefore confined to granting a mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihni*) to the *known* and thus acknowledges the external world through this mental form. Thus, Ṣadrā's reality of knowledge is likened to creator and created as a relationship between *knower-subject* and *known-object*

Ṣadrā emphasized the limitation of this existentiating of forms to the subjective realm of each human's inner world. Hence, just as the *Necessary Being's* knowledge leads to the creation of an object of knowledge in the objective world (*al-'alamal-'ayni*), man's knowledge (contemplation of that *thing*) leads to its mental existence (*al-wujūd al-dhihni*) within man's inner kingdom. Moreover, since man is created in the image of God, the human soul is innately creative and has an ability to bring some *thing* into mental existence with no *thing* having preceded it (*ibdā'*). Bringing some *thing* to existence without a precedent is the very act of creation upon which God created the cosmos, i.e. creation from no-*thing*. But man's ability to create some *thing* is confined to its mental form and never proceeds beyond the mind so that no person can existentiate something in the external world (bring it into existence) without some precedent. Whenever a sculptor, for instance, imagines a figure, the initial *imaginal* form of the statue is existentiating by his soul with no *thing* have preceded it in his mind; he/she then attempts to craft it out of wood, metal or stone in the external world. The sculptor's main creative effort, however, is that of the *imaginal* world in which the soul existentiates the mental form of the figure. Hence, what is seen in the external world, as the objective statue, is not the actual creation but rather an image that represents the created mental form.

The crucial point is that some primordial substance such as wood or metal precedes the objective existence of the statue in the external world while its mental form is subjectively issued from within man's soul without substantial precedent. This illustrates two causal relationships: (a) between the human soul and *imaginal* forms created in the mind; and (b) between man and the material statue in the external world. When someone images a statue, the soul becomes the efficient cause (*al-'Illa al-F'ili*) of the statue's reality as a mental

form—the human soul subjectively existentiates it from nothing, i.e. from no precedent within the realm of mind. Hence, the mental form as subjective reality depends on the human soul just as light depends on fire. But when a correspondent material form of the *imaginal* is fashioned objectively in the external world, the maker with his body as the moving cause (*al-‘illa al-mu‘idda*), gathers previously available constituent parts without bringing them into existence. Thus, the objective existence of the statue is not dependent on its maker for its components; and although the sculptor dies, the statue remains for thousands of years. The maker creates only the *imaginal* form of the work while the objective substance of the externalized form is independent of the maker.

Based on these causal relationships, the cognitive interaction of the human *being* with mental forms and external products differ. Knowledge of mental forms is categorized as presential knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-huduri*), and knowledge of external objects is categorized as acquired knowledge (*al-‘ilm al-ḥuṣūli*). Since an *imaginal* form of an object issues from the human soul, it presents directly to the soul of the person who apprehends it presentially. More precisely, as mental forms issue from the human soul, they existentially present to the soul. Ṣadrā justified specific *imaginal* presence as existence in existential unity with the soul, which constitutes the inner world of human *being*. To the contrary, an external object corresponding to its *imaginal* form is indirectly comprehended by the soul, which can only directly perceive the mental form.

### **The Theory of Unification in Mullā Ṣadrā’s Epistemology**

The theory of unification is the backbone of Ṣadrā’s epistemology. It explains the relationship between *knower* and *known* based on a kind of subjective development and represents his departure from Avicenna’s traditional view of knowledge as a conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) with Active Intellect<sup>22</sup> to unification (*ittiḥād*) with the intelligible,

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<sup>22</sup> This is a Platonic interpretation insisting on the passive role of human intellect in receiving intelligible forms from a higher level of existence. This level of existence is the source from which all intelligible forms emanate. The apprehension of these forms is owed to a kind of connection (*ittiṣāl*) between human intellect and the main source which Avicenna calls active intellect. See Ibn Sinā, *Ishārātwa al-Tanbihāt* 4

and from representational to presential knowledge. This theory justified Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge as a mode of *being* for the *knower*-subject. Relying on his theory of unification of human intellect with the intelligible, Ṣadrā described his outline of knowledge within the hierarchical order of the cosmos. His purpose was to approach the reality of knowledge from an ontological and cosmological perspective that depicted knowledge as a spiritual transformation of the *knower*-subject relative to the entire cosmos. This view interprets knowledge as a means by which the soul's being becomes intensified through knowing. Hence, Ṣadrā deemed any knowledge whose fruit did not perfect the knower as mere delusion. He closely associated knowledge with concrescence whereby the *knower*-subject remained singularly involved in a dynamic process of evolution. Correspondingly, Ṣadrā did not see the *knower*-subject as a passive agent or assimilator that adapts to knowing a *known*-object as separately organized with an internal reality of its own. The *knower*-subject is an active agent who constantly structures and restructures his/her inner reality, which for Ṣadrā's existentialism, is the very *being* that presents to itself and at once is both *known* and *knower*. Thus, knowledge is not conceived as a relationship between two discrete realities but is developmentally subjective as an internally evolving *being* that sequentially passes through existential stages. Moreover, Ṣadrā tried to solve difficulties with *representation* and *attribution* vis-à-vis this relationship between *known* and *knower*.

To complete the schema, Mullā Ṣadrā had to justify ontological bases according to which he could prove the unification of the intellect and the intelligible. For the purpose, he deconstructed traditional essentialism which is inherently Platonic, Aristotelian and followed by Muslim Peripatetics like Avicenna. First off, he replaced the notion of beings and existents (*mawjudāt*) as separate *things* and put forward the primacy of *being* (existence or *wujūd*) as a continuum that embraced a spectrum ranging from imperfection to perfection and from feebleness to intensification. For Ṣadrā, *being* was the only continual reality, one that manifested different facts in

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vols, ed. Suleiman Donia (Cairo: Daru al-Ma'arif, 1950) 4/2, 396; C. Shams Inati, *Ibn Sinā's Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics an Analysis and Annotated Translation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 104.

terms of placement in the hierarchical order of the cosmos. In addition to the primacy of being, his notion of an ontological gradation (*tashkik*) dissolved the impenetrable boundary drawn by essentialism between intellect and intelligible as distinct entities. Thus, the human soul either has or doesn't have knowledge in accord with various degrees of existential intensification. Moreover, the soul's obtained knowledge *is* its developed and evolving *being*. In this sense, *known* and *knower* both exist within an ontological continuum and the only distinguishing factor between them is the existential intensity of the level of their *being*.

To establish his epistemological theory of unification, Ṣadrā had to restructure ontological assumptions that led to the critique of unification made by some scholars. The main ontological presupposition of Peripatetic scholars that prevented them from accepting Ṣadrā's theory of unification was its notion or assumption of transformation (*istiḥala*). The supposed transformation occurs as a kind of change that includes a sequential series of instant generations (*kūn*) and corruptions (*fasād*). Peripatetic scholars critiqued unification because, in terms of transformative changes, it implied man would lose the sustainable reality of an existence that is continually kept in flux. Said differently, sequential stages of generation and corruption compel us to objectively face new (different) realities.<sup>23</sup> This is why Peripatetics denied changes in the category of substance (*jawhar*), because change breaks the continuity of the thing's reality. With unification we face at least two realities, A and B, which are brought together to form a complete third reality, C. This processivity allows for some hypotheses to assume that all can lead to impossibility. But for Avicenna, if two realities unite, they transform into a new identity that is essentially different and lose their initial identity. Thus, keeping a continual reality is core to Avicenna's critique of the theory of unification. Mullā Ṣadrā attempted to solve this problem with an appeal to *being* (*wujūd*) as the principle within everything that allows for intensification, diminution, perfection and even deficiency.<sup>24</sup> Based on the primacy of *being* and gradational reality, Ṣadrā forwards a view that in the

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<sup>23</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* I (3):327-329.

<sup>24</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* I (3):324-5; Kalin, "Mullā Ṣadrā's theory...", 196.

case of intellective substances, the unification of A and B leads to a higher existential mode of 'A' rather than a different substance 'C'. This ontological presupposition gave license for an acceptable third hypothesis of unification.

Mullā Ṣadrā posited the possibility of eliciting various meanings (*ma'ānī*) from an intellective existent while the identity of each is continually preserved. For instance, meanings of mineral, plant, animality and rationality are at once apprehended from another reality, man, without the loss of any individual entity. Thus, Ṣadrā answered Avicenna's critique of two united realities losing their prior essences to become something new.<sup>25</sup> For Ṣadrā, the possibility of eliciting various meanings and concepts from one single reality (man) stemmed from man's higher ontological status. Hence, in spite of a multiplicity of concepts, the entity, man, is preserved, since the ontological status of man is as the source of these meanings. In fact, according to Ṣadrā, each meaning is apprehended from an existential level of man's being, or via the gradational ontology that draws various concepts from a single object.

The possibility of eliciting various concepts from one object paved the way for Ṣadrā's response to Avicenna's argument against the unification of intellect and intelligible. Avicenna had rejected unification because he thought if the human soul unites with an intelligible form it is dissolved within it, thereby leading to the loss of continuity of self as a single reality. Ṣadrā responded by arguing that the process of unification only dissolved negative existential aspects of the human intellect.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, dissolved negative existential aspects of the knowing intellect comprise the inability to apprehend the intelligible form. And since inability originates in non-existence, losing it purchases a hold in the process of ontological evolution. Hence, Ṣadrā interpreted dissolution as the existential evolution of the knowing intellect by which the *knower*-subject does not become something less but rather evolves to a higher level of being in the hierarchical order of the cosmos. Gaining knowledge therefore involves the transformation of an individual's state of *being* from a lower to a higher existential level.

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<sup>25</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* I (3):326.

<sup>26</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār* I (3):327.328.

Ṣadrā assigned the existential evolution of the knowing intellect to the realm of cosmological ontology in an attempt to keep his theory safe from subjectivism. His attribution proposed this ‘existential evolution of the *knower*-intellect’ as its ontological relation to the external world. In justification, he made full use of two ontological principles within his philosophical system: the theory of gradational being and the theory of substantial motion. Relying on both, Ṣadrā not only preserved the soul’s continuity or self as the *knower*-intellect but he also united intellect and intelligible by the extension of human *being* into the entire cosmos.

The unity of *known* and *knower* is an epistemological doctrine supported by another ontological theory called the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*). The significance of this theory is that it allowed Ṣadrā to acquire the most crucial concept of his epistemology, namely *presence* (*hudur*). *Presence*, in its existential sense, constitutes the structure of Ṣadrā’s epistemology because it clarifies a state of being that is identical for both intellect and intelligible, which is a special identity principle of Ṣadrā’s theory of knowledge. Thus, if we call the *knower*-subject, ‘A’, and the *known*-object, ‘B’, the existences of ‘A’ and ‘B’ are identical; and as ‘B’ is presented to ‘A’ it is known also by ‘A’. This interpretation argues that consciousness, as the *presence* of a *known*-object to the *knower*-subject, requires concomitant unity between the *known* and *knower*. According to the primacy of *being*, existence is the reality of everything and such a unity can only be realized within the existence of the *known*-object and *knower*-subject.

This kind of *presence* refers only to immaterial realities.<sup>27</sup> Hence, *presence* in Ṣadrā’s philosophical system is meaningful only for the immaterial because material objects cannot have this *presence*. Hence, unity and *presence* between the intellect and *known*-object occurs only between the human soul — an immaterial reality — and the immaterial form of a *known*-object, but not with the physical concrete existent. This is because matter and the material world essentially lack *presence* and are consequently insufficient for the process of *knowing*. By explanation, we imagine a material object divided into two parts. Since each part of the object is now absent

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<sup>27</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā (1984), *Maḥāṭih al-ghaib*, 109.

from the other, if we continue such division we encounter four parts, all absent from the other three. The more divided the material object, the more we observe absence. If we continue the process indefinitely, we will observe more absence in the material object.<sup>28</sup>

Ṣadrā concluded there is no knowledge in matter because of the deficiency of its *presence* at the lowest level of existence. Moreover, the unity of *being* theory interprets the relationship between intellect and intelligible forms as a state of presence that constitutes a cognitive relationship between immaterial *known*-object and *knower*-subject. This integration of unity and difference between *known* and *knower* provides occasion to understand another ontological theory, the gradational *being*, which in Ṣadrā's epistemology solved the contradiction of unity and multiplicity between *known* and *knower* as well as ontological levels for each.

Ṣadrā developed this argument by presenting yet another ontological theory, the gradational being or systematic ambiguity of *existence*, by which he explains difference and relationship between *known* and *knower* in terms of the different levels of hierarchical order within the entire Universe.<sup>29</sup> He was of the opinion that the existence of everything in the world is univocal and that differences between various objects refer to intensity and gradation of *being*. Accordingly, the existentially higher position of the *knower* provides a situation in which the *known*-object is totally present to the *knower*, and in which the *knower*'s common part of existence with the *known* is present to the *known*-object. Furthermore, the phenomenon of knowledge continually expands while relying on yet another ontological theory that offers a dynamic perspective of reality in the hierarchical order within the entire existence.

The theory of substantial motion<sup>30</sup> completes Ṣadrā's system by stating that the reality of knowledge is a gradual inclination to advance from potential to actuality. This provides a dynamic that readily explains the universe's evolution from deficiency to perfection. For example, the acquisition of knowledge perfects the human soul whereby the human's *being* grasps the transcendence of

<sup>28</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfar*, (1378 AH), 297, 298 (line 4); Rahman, (1975), 213.

<sup>29</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Ta'liqa Bar Hikmat al-Ishrāq*, lithographic print, (n.d.), 294.

<sup>30</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Asfār*, 7:298; Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Shavāhid*, 85.

cosmological hierarchies. In Ṣadrā's view, the purpose of knowledge is to actually change the soul's substance. Hence, when sense organs connect with external objects, the experience produces special biological effects in the nervous system that enable the soul to expand or increase the intensity of its existence. This addendum to existence is identical to knowledge so that knowledge equates with a level of human *being* that is newly created by a kind of extension of existence within human soul as the gradation of being.

### Analysis

Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge acquisition posits a process of ontological perfection of man's reality as a *knower*-subject whose soul originates with the body but is spiritual in survival.<sup>31</sup> Thus, via this processivity and on a continuum, the soul becomes less material and more spiritual as it trends towards Absolute Pure *Being*. Acquiring knowledge is considered by Ṣadrā as a part of this ontological process tending towards intelligibility which is free from limitation, absence, and darkness of matter. Participation in intelligibility affects the *knower*-subject as a process of transformation that transcends *knower*-subject to reach greater intellectual and spiritual essence and thus acquire higher ontological degrees of *being*. Mullā Ṣadrā's general attitude in explaining the reality of knowledge highlights the ontological aspect of the human soul as the *knower*-subject, and in the epistemic aspect he strongly emphasised on knowledge by presence which is united with the *knower*. Accordingly, it is difficult to deny that the reality of knowledge in his philosophical system is, to a large extent, dependent on man's inner world, which even unavoidably inclines towards a kind of subjectivism.

Ṣadrā's ontological explanation of knowledge acquisition places the self (*nafs*) in a crucial position as the *knower*-subject and immediately conjures a kind of subjectivism. His repeated emphasis on *self*, *self*-knowledge and *presential*-knowledge is so strong we might conclude the existential status of the soul determines reality and the extent of knowledge. This becomes even more explicit with

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<sup>31</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfār*, 4:1.4, lines 3 FF.

his theory of unification, which laid the ontological groundwork for the human intellect as *creator* and intelligible forms as *creation*. Thus, the created form is consequent to existential perfection of the soul that creates and unites with it to represent a real object in the external world.

Through a critical lens we can question the validity of this representation. Specifically, the issue becomes serious in the *knowing* of material objects because Ṣadrā held that their materiality could not be known. In other words, the existential unity of intellect and intelligible leaves the relationship between *knower* and the *known* object in the external world unanswered. His disconnection between soul and material world has roots of separation as explicitly explained by Fazlur Rahman:

This is the result of the doctrine that (1) knowledge consists in a presentation (*hudur*) of the object to the subject: (2) nothing physical can be “present” either to anything else or, indeed, to itself since its parts are mutually ‘absent’; and (3) since both the external objects and the sense organs are physical, there is no question of the former being ‘present’ to the latter.<sup>32</sup>

The issue becomes graver if we contemplate the essence of objects, which in Ṣadrā's doctrine originates from the limitation of contingent existents having partial existence. Ṣadrā's explanation indicates that the origin of essences in the external world is a non-existent factor; namely, that limitations of contingent existents evoke the human intellect to construct the concept of essence (*al-māhiyya*) for existents in order to know them. Consequently, because we know every existent through its essence, we might conclude that Ṣadrā's theory of knowledge is soundly dependent upon the subjective operation of human intellect as it encounters the physical environment. Hence, we see that the extension of both role and impacts of material objects in the external world becomes blurred by the processivity of knowledge acquisition by which we know the external world.

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<sup>32</sup> Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mullā Ṣadrā*, 185.

Knowledge by means of which we come to know physical concrete objects in the material world stands at the center of the question. Human intellect cannot know the essence of God because God's essence *is* His existence. Moreover, since His existence is unlimited the human mind cannot abstract the essence of God's Being because there is no limit to His existence. But since the being of contingent existents bears some limitation, the human mind can construct some concept of essence from the confinement of their existence to know the existents. Hence, limitation, which is a non-existent matter, generates the mental construction of essences through which we know external concrete objects. But we know that Ṣadrā's major disagreement with the theory of abstraction vis-à-vis Peripatetic Philosophy centered on its negative aspect. The framework of abstraction is that of deprivation while the reality of knowledge for Ṣadrā was *being*, which is positive.<sup>33</sup> The question then is: 'How did he establish the origin of constructing essences based on the limitation of contingent existents, with limitations bearing a kind of negative aspect?' Of course, the question cannot be propounded in knowledge by *presence* that is intuitively present to the soul because the question relates to knowledge concerning the material world. Specifically, it is obvious that we *know* the material world through universal concepts that are abstracted from contingent

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<sup>33</sup> Ṣadrā thought many definitions propounded by Greek and Muslim thinkers, especially Peripatetics like al-Fārābī and Avicenna, inadequately explained knowledge and presented an unsuitable outline of the human act of knowing. In his view, Aristotle and Muslim Peripatetics held negative definitions that fell short of the mark. The Peripatetic definition put forth the concept of abstraction (*tajrīd*) to underscore the idea that when a mental form of an object becomes disengaged from material properties it is deprived of certain qualities and thus becomes abstract (*mujarrad*) inherent in the mind. The extension of this disengagement from material properties consequently increases from *sensible* to *imaginal* and *intelligible* forms. In other words, a reciprocal relationship exists between non-materiality and intelligibility, indicating that the more disengaged from material conditions, the closer the human mind approaches an intelligible form. But Ṣadrā's criticism of this definition of knowledge specifically targeted the notion of deprivation as a negative concept. According to him, knowledge and the process of *knowing* involved affirmative, evolving and consummative processivity. Hence, his definition presented an existentially evolutionary concept in opposition to Aristotle's deprivation.

realities. The question might probably be more serious by adding the fact that these concepts constitute a large part of our knowledge, including social and scientific knowledge.

Another challenge to MullāṢadrā's epistemology concerns his theory that intelligible forms possess more reality than material objects. This assertion is based on his ontological principle of the gradation of *being*, which portrays a hierarchical framework for all of existence. According to his comprehensive framework, some *existents* possess more reality than others. Thus, the world of intelligibility stands at a higher level of *being* as 'more real' than the precipitant material world's lower degrees of existence. Therefore, knowledge, as a mode of *being* and because it is immaterial has levels of existence with greater portions of reality. This implies that an intelligible form is more real than its corresponding material counterpart. According to Ṣadrā, because knowledge is nothing but *being*, we see the same gradation in the realm of human knowledge. Criterion for the gradation of knowledge is the extent of its generality.<sup>34</sup>

Being and therefore knowledge has levels of strength and weakness. Whenever being becomes stronger, its inclusion of universal meanings and abstract intellectual quiddities becomes more, and when being reaches the realm of simple intellect which is totally separate from matter and quantities, it covers all intelligibles and things.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, we apprehend effects from a physical object (e.g., a charging rhino) more clearly than its intelligible form - a point propounded in the conclusion of Ibrahim Kalin's dissertation.

Nonetheless, the issue can be reconsidered from another perspective. Ṣadrā was influenced by Neoplatonic ideas that affirm the priority of intelligible forms compared to their corresponding material objects based on both permanency and invariability of the world of intelligibility. However, human knowledge, even in the intelligible realm is subject to fundamental changes. We commonly

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<sup>34</sup> Mullā Ṣadrā, *Aṣfar* (1981), 3:378, 379.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

see intelligible forms through what we previously thought we knew of external objects that were not the real forms of those realities. Thus, exposure to changes in human knowledge concerning intelligible forms can undermine their previously held validity and priority. The problem is more clearly expressed by Nagel: “The old view then comes to be regarded as an appearance, more subjective than the new view, and correctable or confirmable by reference to it. The process can be repeated, yielding a still more objective conception.”<sup>36</sup>

To counter this criticism it is possible to appeal to the gradation of *being* in the intelligible by presupposing the relativism is due to hierarchical degrees of perfection in the human soul. More precisely, the soul, at each level of existential perfection, apprehends some level of the world of intelligibility, meaning there is no relativism in the intelligible realm, yet the human soul suffers a kind of epistemic relativism in the processivity of its hierarchical ordering of perfection. Indeed, at each level of its existential evolution, the human soul reaches an existence representing higher levels of realities. Hence, the reality of acquiring knowledge is a continual process of the soul’s ontological perfection by which different levels of progress apprehend various manifestations of the entire sempiternal singularity or expanding reality, whose summit is *Absolute Being* upon which lesser levels of existential poverty are dependent. However, this justification cannot settle any priority for intelligible forms of actuality in human knowledge because, by and large, we face the same relativism in intelligibles by means of what we know of the material world.

## Conclusion

Ṣadrā’s hierarchical system of *being* presents a kind of unity between the *known-object* and *knower-subject* and knowledge. These inferences merge under the primacy and comprehensive notion of *existence*. This existential unity is assumed whereby ‘*known* and *knower*’ provide a complete *presence* of the *known* to the *knower* wherein their common existence holds a partial *presence* of *knower*

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<sup>36</sup> T. Nagel, *The view of nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 4.

to *known*. The epistemic theory of unification provides for a pyramidal outline that perfectly exhibits Ṣadrā's cosmology (all of existence) as emanating from a Single *Absolute Being*. Explicating his unity of intellect and intelligible forms, Ṣadrā appealed to the creative capacity of the human intellect that presupposed ontological dependence on human intellect for intelligibles.

Ṣadrā's theories of knowledge are vulnerable to two epistemic challenges, both of which are rooted in his ontological presuppositions. Serious criticism expresses concern for the danger of subjectivism's inconsonance with his realism. The origin of this censure is Ṣadrā's ontological system based on the unity of existence. In spite of a capacity to admit a kind of subjectivism in his epistemic exposition, the interpretation could possibly be considered a privilege because his philosophical system emphasizes the existential effect of knowledge as the perfection of the human soul. Another serious challenge to Ṣadrā's epistemology concerns realism, since his theory posits that intelligible forms possess more reality than material objects. His assertion is based on another ontological principle, namely his analogical gradation of *being*, which portrays a hierarchical outline for the entirety of existence. According to this comprehensive framework, some existents enjoy more reality compared to others.

For Ṣadrā, the world of intelligibility is a realm of higher levels of existence that bear greater portions of reality; i.e. intelligible forms are simply more real than their material counterparts. Yet we ask why we should apprehend effects from a physical object more clearly than its intelligible form and the matter can be reconsidered more seriously by another route. With ceaseless advances in human knowledge, intelligibles constantly change and we commonly see previous intelligible forms do not represent realities and must be replaced. This exposure to change undermines both the validity and priority assumed by Platonic and Sadrian schools for intelligible forms. The conclusion leads us to a tenet that our apprehension of the truth of knowledge is never absolute, but is rather a subjective development of ontological concrescence that occurs within the existence of the *knower*-subject.